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SUBJECT: HANOI ARCHBISHOP DISCUSSES CHURCH ISSUES WITH AMBASSADOR

REF: Hanoi 1109

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SUMMARY

¶11. (SBU) In an August 13 farewell call by the Ambassador, Hanoi Archbishop Ngo Quang Kiet praised the Ambassador's contribution to international religious freedom, noting in particular recent progress in northern Ha Giang Province. The Archbishop agreed with the Ambassador's assessment that much progress had been made but that there was still work to do, noting that the Catholic Church faces significant challenges overcoming the limitations GVN authorities place on education and healthcare work. The Archbishop sees GVN-Vatican relations progressing slowly. The Ambassador stressed that the Catholic Bishop's Council could play an important role as a "collective voice" in dealing with the GVN. The Church will shortly submit two new names to the GVN for vacant bishoprics in Thai Binh and Vinh dioceses. The Archdiocese remains interested in training religious workers in the United States, and the Embassy will work to enhance cooperation and communication on these kinds of cases. End Summary.

PROGRESS ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM BUT STILL AREAS FOR WORK

¶12. (SBU) Ambassador Marine told Hanoi Catholic Archbishop Kiet in an August 13 farewell call at the Archbishop's office that he was pleased with the work they had done together during his term to promote religious freedom in Vietnam. He recalled the Archdiocese's historic cooperation with the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN) in November 2006 in hosting an ecumenical service at Hanoi's Cua Bac Church on the occasion of President Bush's first visit to Vietnam during the APEC Leader's Summit. The Ambassador also noted his recent calls on Cardinal Man and Protestant house church leaders in HCMC as well as GVN President Nguyen Minh Triet's visit to Washington, in which he discussed religious freedom issues with President Bush.

¶13. (SBU) While much progress has been made, the Ambassador said there was still much work to be done, including problems with implementation of the legal framework on religion in the Northwest Highlands; reported abuses of H'Mong Christians in the North; and GVN limitations on the role of religious organizations in education and social work, throughout the country. The Ambassador noted that while his recent media roundtables tended to focus more on political issues, he had discussed religious freedom and humanitarian issues in his farewell calls on senior leaders and in a widely-publicized VietnamNet web chat the previous week. It was important to make

certain that the GVN understands the USG will remain focused on the issue of religious freedom.

¶14. (SBU) The Ambassador asked the Archbishop whether his generally favorable assessment of the current status of religious freedom in Vietnam was overly optimistic. The Archbishop responded that he had read the Ambassador's web chat as well as comments from his recent media roundtables in HCMC and Hanoi, and he was satisfied with the Ambassador's analysis of the status of religious freedom in Vietnam.

The Archbishop said the Ambassador had contributed significantly to the advancement of human and political rights and religious freedom in Vietnam.

PROGRESS IN NORTHERN HA GIANG PROVINCE

¶15. (SBU) The Archbishop thanked the Ambassador and the U.S. Embassy staff for their support to the Church in Ha Giang Province (Note: Both the Ambassador and Embassy Political Section have taken trips within the past year to Ha Giang Province to press local authorities on religious freedom issues. End Note.). The Archbishop said there had been significant progress there in the last six months, with more Catholic congregations getting registered and priests facing no further impediments in conducting religious services. Recently, the Provincial People's Committee granted the Catholic congregation in Ha Giang Town a piece of land on which to build a church, a previously long-unanswered request.

GVN NEEDS TO COME UP TO SPEED ON SOCIAL WORK

¶16. (SBU) The Archbishop said the GVN needs to improve its handling of religious education and training and relax the ongoing

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restrictions on the Church's ability to perform social and charitable work, particularly in health care. Kiet said the Church still faced many limits in these areas and needed to press the authorities for progress.

¶17. (SBU) The Ambassador agreed that the GVN needed to do much more in providing quality education to its young people in this rapidly developing economy. He suggested that the Catholic Bishop's Council (due to meet in session in October) may want to approach the GVN with a "collective voice" and a specific proposal on how the GVN could better respond to the country's educational needs and the positive role the Church could play.

¶18. (SBU) On the social work and healthcare front, the Ambassador said GVN authorities regularly tell him they want religious organizations involved, a view President Nguyen Minh Triet had expressed to a group of Catholic bishops back in January 2007. The Ambassador suggested that this was also an area where the best strategy may be for the Bishop's Council to develop a concrete proposal and speak in a collective voice, and that this is one area where consistent pressure on the GVN is needed.

GVN-VATICAN RELATIONS: SOME PROGRESS

¶19. (SBU) The Ambassador raised the issue of GVN-Vatican relations, including the refusal by the GVN of two Vatican-nominated candidates for two vacant bishoprics in Vinh and Thai Binh dioceses, and asked whether possible internal tensions, within the Catholic Church, may have had something to do with their rejection. The Archbishop said the Church was now working on two new names for the vacant bishoprics and would submit those names to the GVN soon. The Archbishop did not deny that internal Church concerns about "too many southern Bishops" may have been a factor, but concluded that there are no disagreements or complaints about this within the

Church.

¶10. (SBU) The Archbishop told the Ambassador that overall he thought there was some progress toward establishing official GVN-Vatican relations and noted the GVN decision to establish a working committee as a necessary step in this direction.

TRAINING RELIGIOUS WORKERS IN THE UNITED STATES

¶11. (SBU) The Ambassador raised the issue of recent Vietnamese seminarians who failed to get student visas to undertake religious study and training in the United States. The Ambassador explained to the Archbishop USG visa application policies and procedures in this regard and suggested that it would be helpful for our consular section to receive documentation in advance - specifically, detailed information about the training program and a letter of support from the sponsoring institution in the United States. He told the Archbishop he was hopeful that we could work together to minimize future difficulties.

¶12. (SBU) Kiet thanked the Ambassador for the information, and said both his Archdiocese and the Catholic Church in Vietnam remained very interested in sending seminarians to the United States for training.

PLEASED WITH STATEMENTS BY INCOMING AMBASSADOR MICHALAK

¶13. (SBU) The Ambassador noted that incoming Ambassador Michael Michalak would arrive in Vietnam soon, and it would be useful for the Archbishop to meet with him. The Archbishop agreed and noted that he had read Ambassador's Michalak's confirmation hearing statements on religious freedom and was very pleased with them. The Archbishop again warmly thanked the Ambassador for his contributions to religious freedom and political rights in Vietnam.

COMMENT

¶14. (SBU) The Archbishop clearly would like the U.S. Mission to continue using its influence with the GVN to encourage resolution of problems preventing a greater role for the church in education and social work - a message that we have heard consistently. The

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Archdiocese also sees the United States as a place to help train future generations of Vietnamese Catholic clergy.

MARINE